

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word Mel and Michael

by the editors

The dismay that almost all progressives felt after the U.S. election was understandable, and it has resulted in a fair amount of critique, finger-pointing, and despair. However, the anti-war movement actually accomplished something quite remarkable: a 50-50 split in an election that was largely a referendum on the war and Bush's domestic agenda. Given the situation in the months after 9/11 with Bush ascendant, and the prospects for a total triumph in November 2004, fighting to a near draw in the presidential election is a significant accomplishment that shows what local activists involvement can do. Grass roots organizing has always been the best way to pressure the Democrats on a national level. And it was the Democrat leaders who forced the selection of Kerry. The base was emphatically not very enthusiastic and ended up stuck with an "Anybody But Bush" playing field.

Much has been written about the influence of the right, radio talk shows, and Fox News on the current political landscape. But another way to think about it is to compare the two biggest surprise film auteurs of 2004: Mel Gibson and Michael Moore. In many ways they represent the current terrain of political culture today. Both are polemicists, and ruefully, we can reflect that the United States gets the polemicists it deserves, again in a 50-50 split.

If nothing else, Michael Moore's prominence the past 24 months has been remarkable as both a political and media phenomenon. We at *Jump Cut* always been skeptical of Moore, from one of the first scenes in *Roger and Me* where Moore is trying to make the point that his falling out with the trust fund radical kids who brought him to San Francisco to edit *Mother Jones* was fine with him because the Bay Area was full of phonies. To demonstrate this, he has a San Francisco coffee house waitress give a full recitation of all the varieties of coffee drinks available. Mocking a working class woman and making her do something that is required to keep her job, in order to score points on snobs in the days before Starbucks was a national chain, wasn't funny, and left a bad taste. But despite that, and even with the polemicist's dilemma of over-simplification to make or mock a point, Moore, if unappointed, still acted as a leader who was highly effective as an antagonist of the powerful and privileged. Masterfully manipulating the publicity machine, he maxed out attention at Cannes, made Disney Corp look foolish, and hit the summer screens big time with *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

While his self-congratulatory attitude, often disorganized public-speaking delivery, and unevenly focused attacks made it hard for even his most enthusiastic supporters to stick with him all the time, the return volleys from the right were astounding. During the first couple of weeks of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s splash, right-wing talk radio and TV overflowed with self-righteous venom, up to and including the *Savage Show*'s barely veiled call for someone to kill Moore as an unpatriotic SOB. Clearly, Moore hit a nerve in the conservative body politic. After years of the Left worrying about how to get its message out in the open, Moore has shown that a mixture of savvy PR, celebrity

manipulation, and jovial comedy can cross over. His activism extended to touring throughout the election campaign to register young voters. And what he did then now provides a model of effective celebrity-based organization.

While not directly parallel, the other big filmmaker phenom of the year, Mel Gibson, can be read as also contributing to the election result. Gibson's self-financed *The Passion of the Christ* evoked an equally explosive controversy. Faithfully seen by the faithful, who block-booked seats and brought out others to this conversion narrative, the film's bloody violence registered on a profound level with viewers, creating an authentic blockbuster from a spectacle of torture. The underpinning message of *The Passion*, "He died for our sins," joins a belief system in which "we" have no responsibility to social justice. Rather, all "we" have to do is confess and take a retro ceremonial communion (in Gibson's cranky extreme right Roman Catholicism) or declare Jesus as our savior (in the Protestant evangelical and fundamentalist variants). The ideas that extremely graphic laceration, whipping, and beating make suitable film fare for primary school children and that the film is innocent of anti-Semitic portrayals mark Christian fundamentalism's willful ignorance. Yet when dealing with U.S. culture, even fervent evangelicals discover to their dismay that a rising tide of irrationality floats all boats. Now *The DaVinci Code*'s runaway success continues the dialect of irrational enlightenment in the wake of *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*' Frodo.

At the start of Bush's second term, we need to see the 50/50 electoral split not as a geographic blue state/red state separation (for the division exists everywhere), but as representing a deep contradiction and asking for a strategic response in relation to it. The core problem the world faces today is neoliberalism. Although often an unfamiliar term in the United States, *neoliberalism* is a common term elsewhere for the ideology and practice of contemporary transnational capitalism. As a strategic view of the world, it seeks to liberalize trade and finance, let "free" markets reign, and remove government from regulation while privatizing every sector everywhere possible. Neoliberalism's goals are reducing labor costs by exporting jobs, undermining unionization, making work flexible by outsourcing, privatization, and increasing reliance on temporary, adjunct, and limited-term labor. By reducing government spending on the social sector, especially for health and education, it claims to return money and decision making to the individual. Seeking deregulation as the means to a "perfect market," neoliberalism wants to remove the economy from social realities, produce globalized markets and flexible capital, and above all, aim for short-term profits. Concomitant with these goals is the destruction of any and all projects that depend on long-term commitments. Particularly suffering from such an abandonment are the environment and education. Given the whacky extremes of Bush policymakers, classical Marxism's observations often seem like common sense—especially the observation asserted by Lenin in *State and Revolution*, that under capitalism the state has as its basic task maintaining order among competing capitalists in order to keep the system going.

The Bush administration's agenda in Iraq has as a strategic goal establishing not democracy, but strong U.S. control in the region. The government hopes to end up with permanent military bases, control over vast oil reserves and a key geopolitical position in terms of oil transport, looking forward to a near future time when China, Japan, and the EU will expand their oil consumption. What remains to be seen is how a client state can be managed—given ethnic, religious, and regional divisions with an ongoing insurgency. Progressives should make no mistake: Iraq has a strategic importance far beyond what Vietnam represented in the 1960s. But also, when we take this long-term perspective, it is worth remembering how many long years of grassroots organizing finally resulted in tipping the balance in favor of withdrawal and ending the Vietnam war. Clearly, we face

another long haul on another aggressive war, with many closely related connections to domestic and social justice issues. And we must keep both aspects in mind—the global/strategic and the domestic/ immediate—as we continue to organize to challenge Bush's agenda. At its best moments, *Fahrenheit 9/11* dropped its grand conspiracies about Saudis flying away after the attack and instead turned to relate the war directly to deteriorating working-class employment.

The present political scene has its own contradictions, which force socially conscious mediamakers and activists to find new forms to express new realities. We have seen how reality TV increasingly has taken over the television landscape, with primetime programming that embodies the moral Darwinism of "you're fired!" in *The Apprentice* or the deceitful maneuvering of *Survivor*, which title itself says something about the current work force. Viewing such shows finds an echo in many people's attitudes toward public culture. When cynicism becomes the norm, irony becomes a survival tactic. Yet the myth of the "free" individual choosing a "personal" retirement investment account, or using the marketplace to find satisfactory health insurance or a charter school for the kids, parallels the notion of salvation through a "personal" (yet necessarily public) declaration of Jesus as savior. The rhetoric of these moments hides the market as a place where power is exercised. Gibson's *Passion* and its phenomenal success is a symptom of the current moment. Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* in its best moments points to a genuinely radical (to the root) response.

Remembering Bill Van Wert

by Chuck Kleinhans for the editors

Bill Van Wert was one of a group of film people in and around the Comparative Literature program at Indiana University in the early 70s. After some of us moved on and decided to begin *Jump Cut*, Bill joined our first big organizational meeting in December 73. He participated enthusiastically in our first years contributing articles such as his comparison of detective films, "[Phillip Marlowe: hardboiled to softboiled to poached](#)" (JC 3). Although his family priorities and passion for creative writing and teaching creative writing directed his almost boundless energies elsewhere, Bill remained an enthusiastic supporter. We all felt a great loss when we learned of his sudden illness and death.

Bill was always comic and creative, with a knowledge and passion for genre films and surrealism in equal measure. He loved films and talking about films. He became a graduate school legend when he sat down and wrote and typed out what was the first and last draft of his dissertation in two and a half weeks of a sweltering Bloomington Indiana summer, sustained by a room fan and gallons of ice tea. Bill took a teaching job at Temple University, where he stayed, started a family, and emerged from a marriage meltdown as the single dad of three young boys. Being a single dad changed his priorities.

Visiting him several times in the early 80s, I marveled at the amazing organization of the family to get the youngest to daycare and the other boys to school, and Dad to the university. Bill's optimism and humor in the face of a hectic life made manifest the love at the base of the family. After the boys went to bed, Bill would talk and tell stories, then stay up while his guests slept and continue his passion for writing stories and novels. His fiction usually dealt with family with humor and intensity and often won awards and were a tribute to his inventiveness. He was equally passionate

about teaching.

Bill's life as a single dad gave him a practical network of single moms who were working with the same set of daily problems to be solved and this in turn gave him insight into families and their dynamics that many family men never develop. We miss his warmth and compassion intensely.